

Habitat improvement in your

Wildlife habitat. For those of us who hunt and fish, the first thoughts that come to mind when those two words are spoken are fields, marshes, streams, lakes, hills and mountains. Hunters and anglers have always been quick to provide both labor and money to preserve and improve our wildlife habitats for ourselves and our children. But habitat does not mean just wild areas, national forests, or the back 40 — it can mean the backyard as well. Residential neighborhoods can provide habitat to many wildlife species, both

By Dale Whitmore

resident and migratory. Showing your son or daughter the value of wildlife habitat is just as important as teaching them hunting and fishing ethics, and turning the backyard into a wildlife haven is just one way to start.

Wildlife needs four basic elements in the correct arrangement to survive: food, water, cover, and space in which to reproduce and raise young. In planning a backyard wildlife habitat area, the combination of elements you provide should take into consideration the needs of wildlife you wish to attract. The widest variety of habitat elements will attract the greatest number of birds and other animals to your yard.

FOOD — The best plan supplies as much food as possible through vegetation in order to meet wildlife needs year-round. Shrubs, trees, and other plants produce nuts, berries, and other seeds. Your county agricultural extension office, local nursery or nature center can recommend the best wildlife plants for your area.

Winter birds in the Sacramento Valley can include white-crowned sparrows, purple finches, golden-crowned sparrows, Oregon juncos, and scrub jays. Many of these winter visitors spend their summers in the Sierra Nevada and migrate to the Central Valley to escape the snow.

WATER — Wildlife needs water, both for drinking and bathing. Water can be supplied in a birdbath, a small pond, a recirculating waterfall, or a shallow dish. An elevated birdbath may protect birds from cats and other predators, and can



Photo © Henry L. Stuart, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1994

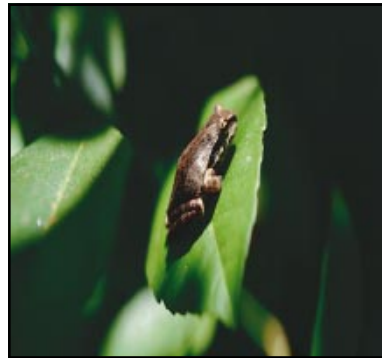


Photo © William R. Porter, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1996

Western toads and Pacific tree frogs (above and left) — Low growing evergreen shrubs, holes dug under boards and covered with rocks or lumber can provide daytime hiding places for these nighttime amphibians.



Photo © Cap Van Balgooy, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1995

Winter birds in the Sacramento Valley may include white-crowned sparrows.

backyard or the back forty



Photo © Willy Onarheim, Outdoor California
Photography Award Program, 1994

Woodduck box programs have helped this species return to a healthy population number.



Photo © Clair de Beauvoir, Outdoor
California Photography Award Program 1997

Western fence lizards are much at home in residential backyards with little disturbed rock piles or woodpiles. They can reduce a nuisance spider population.

Photo © Tom Felts, Outdoor California
Photography Award Program, 1996

Finches will make use of backyard habitat.

be an attractive addition to the habitat. A shallow, wide-rimmed dish will provide water for small animals when placed on the ground near shrubbery or other cover. A small pond set into the ground can provide not only water for drinking and bathing, but cover and reproductive areas for small fish, frogs, insects and reptiles. In the summer heat, be sure to replace the water regularly and to keep bird baths clean. In winter, if temperatures drop below freezing, use a bird bath heater or remove ice in the morning and refill daily.

COVER — Wildlife needs protective cover just as people need the shelter of a house. Food plants can also provide cover. Densely branched, low-growing shrubs, hollow logs, rock piles, brush piles, stone walls, evergreen trees and shrubs and water provide cover for many animal species. Ideal wildlife habitat includes plants ranging in size and density from evergreen ground cover to tall, mature trees. Plant variety assists birds and other animals in selecting the appropriate cover they need for feeding, hiding, courting, and nesting.

SPACE — Wildlife habitat needs to provide a place for wildlife to live. These are areas for courtship and nurturing young animals, and include safe areas for nests, specific plants upon which butterfly caterpillars depend, and the shallow water security that tadpoles find in a pond. Bird houses and nesting shelves can be built and attached to posts, trees, or to a building. Bat and squirrel boxes will provide safe rearing areas when den trees aren't available. Dense plantings of shrubbery provide safe areas for many species of wildlife.

Many of our most interesting animals require a large body of water as a safe haven for their young. Salamanders, frogs, toads, and insects, such as dragonflies and water boatman, begin life in water and are unlikely to prosper without safe, healthy aquatic environments — like a clean stream or a small backyard pool. For more information contact *Backyard Wildlife Habitat Programs, National Wildlife Federation, 8925 Leesburg Pike, Vienna, VA 22184-0001 or call (703) 790-4434.*

Dale Whitmore is a wildlife biologist in Yuba and Sutter counties, and located out of Marysville.